

VZCZCJII899
PP RUEHC RUEHRH RUEHYN RHEHAAA RUEAIIA
DE RUEHJI #0148/01 0831153
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 231153Z MAR 08
FM AMCONSUL JEDDAH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0640
INFO RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 7823
RUEHYN/AMEMBASSY SANAA PRIORITY 0141
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000148

RIYADH PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN, DEPT PASS TO NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/23/2018

TAGS: [PARM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [KCRM](#) [SA](#) [YE](#)

SUBJECT: SMUGGLING ACROSS YEMENI BORDER DIFFICULT TO CURB

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana C. Gfoeller for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The SAG continues to face difficulties in its efforts to curb the smuggling of weapons, drugs, and people across the Yemeni border, according to a Ministry of Interior (MoI) colonel stationed in Jizan. The colonel cited terrain, profit motive, and smugglers' organization and tactics as the prime challenges facing the Kingdom's counter-smuggling operations, but noted modest progress in Saudi-Yemeni cooperation. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) At the conclusion of a March 1 - March 3 visit to the city of Jizan and the Farasan Islands, Econoffs had the opportunity to speak with COL Mohammed Abdullah Assiri (strictly protect) about Yemeni border security issues (NOTE: COL Assiri's official association was with the Jizan governorate's public relations department, but he confided to Econoffs that he was a colonel with the MoI and was in charge of security during our trip. END NOTE.). Based on his extensive and continuing involvement in border security operations, COL Assiri offered a candid account of the status of efforts to counter the smuggling of weapons, drugs, and people from Yemen into the Kingdom, stating that it was unlikely that the SAG would be able to curb illicit flows in the foreseeable future.

Weapons, Drugs, and People

¶3. (C) COL Assiri referred to Yemen as "a land of 60 million weapons, three per person" (NOTE: open source estimates range from 20 million to 60 million weapons and a population of about 22 million. END NOTE.). He said it was virtually impossible to keep this vast supply from spilling across the border, even though the MoI's Border Guard routinely interdicts large shipments of rifles, handguns, and ammunition. The colonel was deeply concerned about the effect that this constant influx will have on the Kingdom's internal security.

¶4. (C) The Border Guard is failing to curb the smuggling of the stimulant leaf qat, according to the colonel. He cited the compelling economic motive for a Yemeni farmer to grow the crop, and said that Saudi consumer demand is a significant factor in maintaining the high price of the plant. In addition to qat, he said that smugglers also bring marijuana across the border, and that both drugs are distributed to Saudi consumers by a loose network of gangs.

¶5. (C) COL Assiri said that smuggled children make up a large portion of illicit human cross-border traffic, and are typically placed in child beggar rings. Parents are often complicit, since the income from one child beggar can support an entire family back in Yemen. The colonel said that the SAG repatriates all illegal immigrants, children and adults alike. He noted that illegal Yemeni immigrants are usually much easier to apprehend than those from the Horn of Africa,

as their expectation of easily sneaking into the Kingdom again makes them less resistant to capture.

Difficulties Defending the Border

¶16. (C) The loosely distributed organization of the smuggling networks presents a growing challenge, according to the colonel. Family and tribal connections, often spanning the border, play a crucial role in the networks. Outside of these trusted associations, participants will have contact only with their immediate buyers and sellers, with limited or no information about the non-adjacent links in the distribution chain. Even in the smuggling of weapons, smugglers will typically be motivated by profit rather than by ideology, unaware of the ultimate destination of the shipments they transmit.

¶17. (C) Smugglers' tactics also make them hard to interdict, particularly in the mountainous western region. COL Assiri described techniques such as walking in columns with individuals spaced far apart so that if the lead smuggler is shot or captured the others can escape. He also noted their use of tricks such as wearing shoes that leave backwards-facing footprints. The colonel said that the Saudi Border Guard was having some success via the increased use of booby traps. However, the border remains so easy to cross that the MoI sees little reason to devote resources to guarding alternative channels such as coastal routes. Indeed, Econoffs saw only one coast guard observation post during their trip, and it was unmanned.

¶18. (C) The colonel pointed to improved Saudi-Yemeni cooperation as one positive trend in the effort to curb smuggling. This includes extradition treaties and joint training exercises. He also noted that smuggling has dropped significantly during periods when the Yemeni government has attempted to prevent cross-border movement by Shia tribes aligned with the al-Houthi rebellion, most recently during a flare-up in January. However, he repeatedly expressed his concern that the continuing high volume of illicit traffic will have a significant negative effect on internal stability and security.

GFOELLER